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AUTHOR Strachbein, Deanna L.; Riley, James D.
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ABSTRACT

The essential theories underlying the whole language approach require individual teachers to examine their assumptions about teaching and learning and to undergo a major paradigmatic shift that requires a new set of assumptions. One of the principal tenets of whole language is that the classroom teacher becomes an autonomous professional. This study was conducted to examine teachers' perceptions of the change process. Kindergarten through grade 6 teachers (N=20), at various stages in their knowledge of whole language, were interviewed and observed to examine: (1) how learning about whole language changed their work with children; (2) those factors that influenced their thinking and practice; and (3) their changing perspectives about teaching and learning. Questionnaires provided demographic data. Responses were analyzed and organized into two categories: teacher perceptions of learning; and teacher perceptions of self. The paper provides selected responses to illustrate teachers' changing perspectives about their work with children, teaching itself, those factors that influence their efforts to make sense of the world of whole language, and the concomitant implications for teaching practice. One conclusion reached was that change is a process accomplished by individuals in a highly personal way; therefore, interactions between teachers and universities must be focused on individuals. (LL)

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WHOLE LANGUAGE TEACHERS AS PRO-ACTORS:
A PARADIGM FOR CHANGE

Deanna L. Strachbein
University of North Dakota
Grand Forks, ND

James D. Riley
Eastern Michigan University
Ypsilanti, Michigan

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Whole language, unlike much of what passes for innovation in education, is not a set of program modifications or methodological changes. Rather it is a philosophical orientation which carries with it implications for teaching and learning. This can present dilemmas for teachers because, in many instances, the essential theories underlying whole language require the individual teacher to examine his or her assumptions about teaching and learning, and also to undergo a major paradigmatic shift.

As teachers change their point of view about teaching and learning, their practice changes. Goodman, Bird, and Goodman (1991) speak of this change in teaching as a "... coming of age as a profession: a complete, integrated philosophical and factual base for making countless professional decisions..." (p.4).

This shift of thinking requires a new set of assumptions about teaching and learning. In order to incorporate these assumptions, it is necessary to think about designing "learning experiences that foster active engagement with the known for the purposes of understanding the unknown" (Monson & Pahl, 1991, p. 52). Change is not a single event, but a process accomplished by individuals who are trying to make sense of how the ideas they are learning fit into their unique contexts (Hord, Rutherford, Huling-Austin, & Hall, 1987). The purpose of this study was to examine teachers' perception of this change process.

Methods and Procedures

Through interviews and observations with teachers at various stages in their knowledge of whole language, as well as questionnaires which gave us demographic data, we examined their changing perspectives about teaching and learning; how learning about whole language has changed their work with children; and what factors influenced their thinking and practice.

Population. We interviewed twenty (20) teachers in two locations, the southwest (13), and the upper midwest (7). The interviews were conducted by two researchers, nineteen (19) in person, and one by telephone in the schools where the teachers teach or in two cases in the teacher's home. All of the twenty teachers interviewed were female.

Experience and Education. The teaching experience of the interviewees ranged from three years to twenty-five years. The grade level placements included kindergarten through grade six. Reading specialists were also interviewed. Many of the participants had taught in a variety of grades and settings. Their experiences with whole language varied from those who had just begun to explore the issues in the last two or three years, to two teachers who have been involved for approximately eight years. The range of education was from a bachelor's degree to a master's degree plus thirty hours.

The Interview. The basic interview consisted of the following core questions:

1. Describe your philosophy of whole language. What are its sources?
2. How is what you are doing now with the children different than what you did as a beginning teacher?
3. How do you define "whole language" in terms of practice?
4. Why did you incorporate whole language in your classroom?
5. What are problems that you have encountered?

As the teacher responded, the interviewer would probe particular responses. For example, after a teacher responded to #5:

JR: "You are almost saying that this is a difficulty that one has to deal with. How have you coped with that?"

Interviewing techniques were adopted from those specified by Siedman (1991). The initial queries were structured as described above and were followed up by specific probes creating more expanded responses. In addition, 12 of the teachers participated in second interviews consisting of questions and probes directed at specific teaching practices and the rationale for those practices.

Analysis of Interviews. Each interview, other than the telephone interview was audio-taped and later transcribed. The interviewers also took notes during the interview. The transcribed interviews were then analyzed for patterns which would indicate the ways in which the teacher's assumptions/and or philosophy about teaching and learning appear to have changed and how these changes appear to have affected the teacher's work with children; and what factors appear to have influenced her shifts in thinking and teaching.

Discussion

Teacher responses are categorized for purposes of discussion into two categories:

1. Making sense of whole language;
2. Teacher perception of learning;
3. Teacher perception of self.

Making Sense of Whole Language. Within these two categories we describe how teachers are making sense of whole language. We have organized selected responses to illustrate the teachers' changing perspectives about their work with children, teaching itself, and those factors which influenced the teacher's efforts to make sense of the world of whole language and the concomitant implications for teaching practice. All of the interviews depicted interacting with children at one point or another.

One of the teachers interviewed in North Dakota has taken classes from one of the researchers. This teacher, Carol Q. has written numerous letters over the past five years. After she had attended The Whole Language Umbrella Conference in Phoenix, Arizona, she wrote in one of her letters:

I certainly realized more at this conference that the word philosophy is hard for many to understand. It is almost like, DON'T TELL ME ABOUT PHILOSOPHY, TELL ME HOW TO DO WHOLE LANGUAGE...it hit me that if we really listen to the philosophy, it will tell us what to do in our classrooms. For example, the program is child-centered--it begins with the language, thoughts, and knowledge of the child. The child is the curricular informant. So...wouldn't it make sense to listen to the children and it will fall into place? Then it might come down to HOW DO YOU LISTEN TO CHILDREN? (C. Q. Letter, 9/91).

Perceptions of Learning. Perceptions of the teacher as a learner were revealed through the interviews. These perceptions either served to contrast the teachers' own earlier perceptions of the learners with the re-tooled perception under the whole language philosophy, or they simply highlighted the effect or intent of whole language philosophy on the behaviors of the learner.

One kindergarten teacher, in her third year of teaching, related an understanding of her earlier perceptions as she contrasted those memories with her emerging views on the learner in terms of whole language intent and impact.

We did a lot of work in the large group, worksheet type work, where I would walk around and monitor and I would take them step by step through that, as opposed to letting them go by themselves. There wasn't as much independent work as far as them being the choosers, having total control over what they did.

Concepts of experimenting, communicating, cooperating within society emerge from her changing views of the learner. The learner has become an actor rather than a passive recipient of knowledge.

The emerging philosophy of this teacher also affects how she approaches some of the day-to-day routines with the children. It is clear that she has learned to trust the children.

I am learning more every year that children can do more than I think they can. We have a lot of safety talks in my room, and we have a lesson on the stapler. Very often they are stapling their own books, they are stapling things up on the board...The first year, I ran myself silly with the stapler. I learned that they can do this. (I am) allowing children to do more and more.

Even with the mundane task of stapling, this teacher extends her changed views of the child's ability to function in the world. A twenty-four year veteran teacher, she says that she is just beginning to learn about whole language.

Teacher perceptions of learners involved in literacy events reflected how the children have become "curricular informants," in contrast to their previous involvement in specific curriculum driven approaches. One third grade teacher talked about how she gets to know the children by having them talk about the things they want to learn, what they are interested in and "where they are coming from." She spends a lot of time in conversation with children and states that they are demonstrating metacognitive awareness when they say: "I need help. I don't understand," or "I really did that good!"

In two other interviews the teachers contrasted what they used to do in writing with what they currently do. One, a first grade teacher, stated that:

It is a totally different group and the stories are just so much different than they were a couple of year ago. I think it is because they (the children) feel free to do the writing and not worry about the spelling. They are thinking about their stories.

The other teacher stated that:

Their writing was just real static...'I like this. I like to do.' Kind of boring. The next year I let them write whatever and use their invented spellings and they wrote more. I would have a parent conference with the book and the parent would type it in conventional spelling. They would then have the book published. Their writing was so much better because they were free to write instead of worrying about the spelling. That was a big change.

Concepts of freedom, writing topics as learner choice, and learners as thinking writers emerge from these teachers' comments. Another teacher who sees the students as actively participating in making connections said:

The first year I got lots of books that I like. Now I can see in the writing that they are using the kind of language you see in books. I see "Once upon a time" ... or "Meanwhile"... or "afterwards." Those are words you don't usually hear in a first grader's vocabulary, but they heard so much literature that they were incorporating some of the same kind of words that authors use in their own writing. It is really exciting. I have a really neat group this year.

In response to a question on the causes of change from the traditional classroom, a third grade teacher stated:

I always felt very strongly that the children should be active with their learning and not passive, but I was hearing a lot of that talk, but not really seeing it. We were still doing the same things every year. It was passive. the teacher was the center of everything and she got up and gave out all this information to these so called "empty jars" that knew nothing. I think now, those kids that come in are not empty, they come in with SO MUCH.

The empty jar analogy contrasts the traditional behavioristic view with the philosophy underlying whole language (e.g. children come to school with substantial prior knowledge, and language competence).

Perceptions of Self as Teacher. One of the principle tenets of whole language is that the classroom teacher becomes an autonomous professional. Decision making by the classroom teacher with respect to teaching strategies and curriculum is based on the professional knowledge of the teacher, in conjunction with the expectations of the school district. It is clear that enhancing the teacher's knowledge base, both in content and pedagogy, as well

as encouraging professional growth and reflectiveness are worthy goals. But, as suggested by Shapiro (1991), other aspects of being a teacher also demand attention; in particular: 1) the teacher's personal development, and 2) social nature of teaching.

Another teacher, the kindergarten teacher cited earlier, continuously examines how her collaboration with other people affects her thinking. She states:

At our support group meeting yesterday, a couple of the members were saying that they still feel overwhelmed. They don't know what to do with some of the kids while they are helping others. So, they feel worksheets and busy work fills this void. I question if they are trusting and respecting the child and giving the students chances to monitor their own learning. So, how do you get teachers to trust children?

Awareness of self and how "self" relates to change is reflected in much of the dialogue in the interviews. Struggling with routines and the lack of models is a frustration for the support group members mentioned above, and the following teacher. Networking is seen as a means for relieving the feeling of frustration, as well as a viable means for coping with the more fluid nature of teaching from a whole language perspective.

I felt like I kept running into a wall, and I wasn't satisfied with those answers, so I would just keep going to different groups of people, whether they were classes or seminars, until I found someone that could NOT tell me WHAT TO DO, but give me some kind of framework, so that I could have a little level of comfort...Once I did that, I did see there was a lot of charted territory. I am feeling comfortable and I am just going with my feelings and what I have read and really believe in what I am doing.

Also emerging from the dialogues with reference to self is the perception of "self as change agent." Various factors such as

support groups, classes, reading, conferences, and personal writing seem to support these teachers as actors in their process of changing.

E. K. said "reading feeds me. Early on I started reading lots of books--Jane Hansen, Donald Graves, Brian Cambourne...I was teaching half time so I spent a lot of time in the library reading journals and bibliographies. I got a lot of books through interlibrary loan."

Another teacher stated:

Even from last year to this year, I feel like I change every year...Each year I have tried to add something else and do something a little differently, or read more and learn what I should be doing better. Talk to other people. It really never stays the same.

The acknowledgment that "It never really stays the same..." reveals an acceptance of a different role than teacher as monitor of children's performance on skills work. The desire for both autonomy and support, when tapped, fuel change toward holistic views.

As I continue to teach, I'm always gaining new understanding and insight. I'm actively involved with the children in creating a literate environment that changes a little with every new story. I write and read along with my students. They see me involved in the same literate events as they are. In this kind of classroom we are all learners (Lee, 1989, p.6).

Conclusion

...the quality of teachers' understandings influence to a large degree what teachers do in the classroom;...the best source for teachers to learn more about teaching and learning, growth and development of children, materials and methods, is through an examination of their own practice and their own classrooms (Perrone, 1991, p. 100).

As we interviewed these twenty teachers, it became more and more evident that change is truly a process accomplished by individuals in a highly personal way. As stated by Hord, et al (1987), "the focus of facilitation should be on individuals, innovations, and the context." (p. 5)

As teacher educators working with in-service teachers who are attempting to absorb and implement whole language theories or any other "deep structure" reforms, we have learned that the interactions between teachers and universities must be focused on individuals.

Carol Q., in a earlier quote asked, "How do you listen to children?" Our question should be, "How do we listen to teachers and children?" They both have rich ideas and important things to say about the change process and in listening to them, we can gain a rich understanding as to how change processes evolve.

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